

The New York Times

Hastert Scouts for House Role After 8 Years as Speaker

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November 22, 2006- Courtesy of The New York Times

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 22 — Speaker J. Dennis Hastert made history this year when he became the longest-serving Republican in that post. Now he is about to go into the books again as one of the few House speakers, and the first in almost 50 years, to rejoin the rank and file.

Defying expectations that he would immediately retire if the Republicans lost their majority, Mr. Hastert is preparing to remain in the House for at least the early months of the 110th Congress while he helps orchestrate a line of succession at home in Illinois and seeks to shape a political ending beyond his party's defeat.

“It is not an ideal situation, but the speaker is a grounded person and is focused on serving another term in Congress,” said Ron Bonjean, a spokesman for Mr. Hastert.

Others close to Mr. Hastert say the speaker, who has said little publicly since the Republicans lost the House, is dejected and embarrassed by the rebuke. The defeat had a strong personal element, because Mr. Hastert's role in the Mark Foley scandal became a Democratic talking point and severely limited his effectiveness as an advocate for House candidates.

Mr. Hastert is awaiting a report from the House ethics committee on whether he or his staff should have taken earlier and more aggressive steps to deal with warnings about improper conduct by Mr. Foley, the former Republican representative from Florida, toward Congressional pages.

The speaker's supporters say Mr. Hastert, whom President Bush urged to seek another term when he might have preferred to retire, would like to end on a brighter note than losing the majority that he has led since 1998.

Just as important, Mr. Hastert wants to make sure that no Democrat, or even a Republican he does not anoint, slips into his Congressional seat through the short campaign preceding a special election.

“I think if he left and we lost the seat, that would be adding insult on top of injury,” said Representative Jack Kingston, Republican of Georgia.

It has not been the modern model for speakers to step down and go to the back bench. In recent years, they have fallen victim to ethics charges, infighting and defeats in their own districts. Thomas P. O’Neill Jr. retired. Sam Rayburn died in office.

Throughout the history of the institution, most speakers left under one of those two circumstances.

According to Fred W. Beuttler, the deputy House historian, Mr. Hastert will be the first speaker since Joseph W. Martin Jr. of Massachusetts, a Republican, to step out of the leadership completely but remain in the House after holding the top spot. Mr. Martin was speaker from 1953 to 1954. Mr. Rayburn became speaker when the Democrats won in 1955.

Mr. Martin remained the Republican leader until major party losses in 1958 and was a member for a couple of terms until he lost a primary.

“It is pretty unusual,” Mr. Beuttler said of Mr. Hastert’s plans.

It will also be a major change for Mr. Hastert. Since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, he has rarely if ever flown on commercial planes because of security concerns, and he has been surrounded by a staff of 60 or so, including Congressional and political workers. For the last eight years, he has stood behind the vice president in the constitutional line of succession to the presidency. Now he will be just one of 435 and a member of the minority in the House, where as Mr. Hastert knows too well, the majority clearly rules.

Friends of Mr. Hastert say they expect he will try to make the most of his remaining time but that it will be surprising if he serves his entire term.

Although there has been regular speculation that Mr. Bush would give him an ambassadorial post, people who have talked with him say his wife, Jean, has indicated some reluctance about moving abroad.

Instead, Mr. Hastert is considering a senior spot on the Energy and Commerce Committee, where he has sat before and developed a reputation as a Republican leader on health care.

“In his heart, Denny is someone who is interested in public policy,” said John Feehery, a former senior Hastert aide who is with the Motion Picture Association of American. “He does not think he is done yet.”

Mr. Hastert is outranked in seniority on the committee by Representative Joe L. Barton of Texas, who has been chairman. Mr. Barton has said he would step aside in deference to Mr. Hastert, though the speaker has not indicated that he would push for the top

Republican slot. Mr. Hastert has a good relationship with Representative John D. Dingell, Democrat of Michigan, who is expected to be chairman of the panel.

“Dennis and I are friends and have been so for a long time,” Mr. Dingell said Wednesday. “I don’t see that there has been anything that has happened or would happen that would impair that friendship.”

But it is unclear how much authority Mr. Hastert would have in such a new role or how much freedom he would have to maneuver, given that the new Republican minority is expected to be leery of negotiating with Democrats or giving them any legislative successes that Democrats could then promote as evidence of their ability to govern.

Congress can be a tough place, and once he is out of the leadership, Mr. Hastert could find his influence ebbing quickly.

Bob Michel, a former Republican leader and onetime mentor to the speaker who talked with him this week, said he doubted that Mr. Hastert’s transition would be too difficult.

“It could be with some people,” Mr. Michel said. “But with Denny’s personality and his whole outlook, it won’t be any problem for him. People love him back home very dearly, and I am sure that he can be some kind of father confessor for members when they have breaks or time to visit on the floor.”